DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 795 CS 203 294

AUTHOR Kline, Charles R., Jr.
TITLE Major Sentence, Minor Sentence, Fragment: What Really "Is" a Sentence?
PUB DATE Mar 76
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; Grammar; Higher Education; *Language Usage; *Rhetoric; *Sentence Structure; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Minor Sentences

ABSTRACT

Rhetorical and linguistic concepts of the sentence are reviewed in the course of introducing the concept of the "minor sentence" (sentence fragments which may occur alone as complete linguistic utterances or which may be combined by parataxis or coordinators with a major sentence). Rather than restraining beginning writers from using minor sentences, broader rhetorical issues of invention, arrangement, and style should be considered. Usage is fluid; considerations of intent and effect, logic, fluency, and audience are more important than grammaticality. (AA)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED137795

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles R. Kline, Jr.

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

MAJOR SENTENCE, MINOR SENTENCE, FRAGMENT: WHAT REALLY IS A SENTENCE?

Charles R. Kline, Jr.

(Delivered at Philadelphia, Pa., March, 1976, Conference on College Composition and Communication)

This speech is a series of points, enumerated for the sake of brevity and clarity, about the English sentence. The goal of the talk is to acquaint you with the concept of the Minor Sentence, which is a linguistical phenomenon, as well as to refresh your memories about the historical antecedents of the structure we call the 'sentence.'

1. In the study of the sentence, there is a difference between the sentence as form and the sentence as format.

2. Form is a grammatical matter. Form is, therefore, best approached as a phenomenon involving structures.

3. Format is a rhetorical matter. Format is, therefore, best approached as a phenomenon involving intents and effects.

4. These distinctions are relatively recent. In the development of humankind, language is relatively recent, and in the development of language the separation of the sentence into the parts of speech was later still.

> Jesperson, Language, p. 429: The evolution of language shows a progressive tendency from inseparable irregular conglomerations to freely and regularly combinable short elements.
>
> _____, p. 439: Again, we saw above that the further back we went in the history of known languages, the more the sentence was one indissoluble whole, in which those elements which we are accustomed to think of as single words were not yet separated.
>
> Piaget, Language and Thought, p. 146: The line of development of language, as of perception, is from the whole to the part, from syncretism to analysis, and not vice versa.

CS 203 294

Read, Style, p. 33: We will only note that in all probability the sentence, as distinct from the primitive indissoluble sound suggested by Jesperson, arose when it first became possible to distinguish between action and objects--between things in themselves and the mobile properties of those things. For then the verb became distinct from the substantive, and these two parts of speech give us the essentials of a sentence.

Ogden and Richards, Meaning, p. 259: Thus the sentence is the chief, but not the only symbolic device by which the togetherness of references is made plain.

5. Roughly analogous to the distinction outlined above is the distinction between acceptability and grammaticality (or grammaticalness), as in

Chomsky, Aspects, pp. 11-12: The notion "acceptable" is not to be confused with "grammatical." Acceptability is a concept that belongs to the study of performance, whereas grammaticalness belongs to the study of competence.***Like acceptability, grammaticalness is, no doubt, a matter of degree, but the scales of grammaticalness and acceptability do not coincide.

_____, p. 11, restates, qua: Grammaticalness is only one of many factors that interact to determine acceptability.

"Acceptability" is to format as "grammaticalness" is to form.

6. What is a sentence, then?

Read, Style, p. 33: The sentence is a single cry. It is a unit of expression, and its various qualities--length, rhythm, and structure--are determined by a right sense of this unity.

7. How, then, is acceptability and/or grammaticalness, i. e., correctness, to be determined?

Pooley, Usage, p. 26: Thus, the factors governing communication in each specific instance set the standards for correctness in that communication; usage conceived of in this light is relative rather than positive, fluid rather than static, psychological rather than logical.

Read's "right sense of this unity" of the qualities of the sentence ("length, rhythm, and structure") is involved in Pooley's fluidness of constraints of usage. (See Read, number 6 above.)

8. What is a non-sentence? Of what is it made?

Read, Style, pp. 33-4: A substantive may stand alone as a sentence, and sometimes does, effectively. But the verb is always understood, or some construction including a verb. When a verb stands alone, it usually has the previous sentence, or the subject of the previous sentence, as a latent subject or predicate. Such isolation of a noun or a verb is merely a device of punctuation: to gain vividness (though the gain be only typographical) the word in question is as it were framed between two full stops.

9. Of the so-called non-sentences, there are units--linguistic units (that is to say, spoken English units)-- called "minor sentences." What are they?

Nida, Synopsis, p. 216: [Minor sentences] may occur alone as complete linguistic utterances or combined by parataxis or coordinators with any major sentence type. [mine]

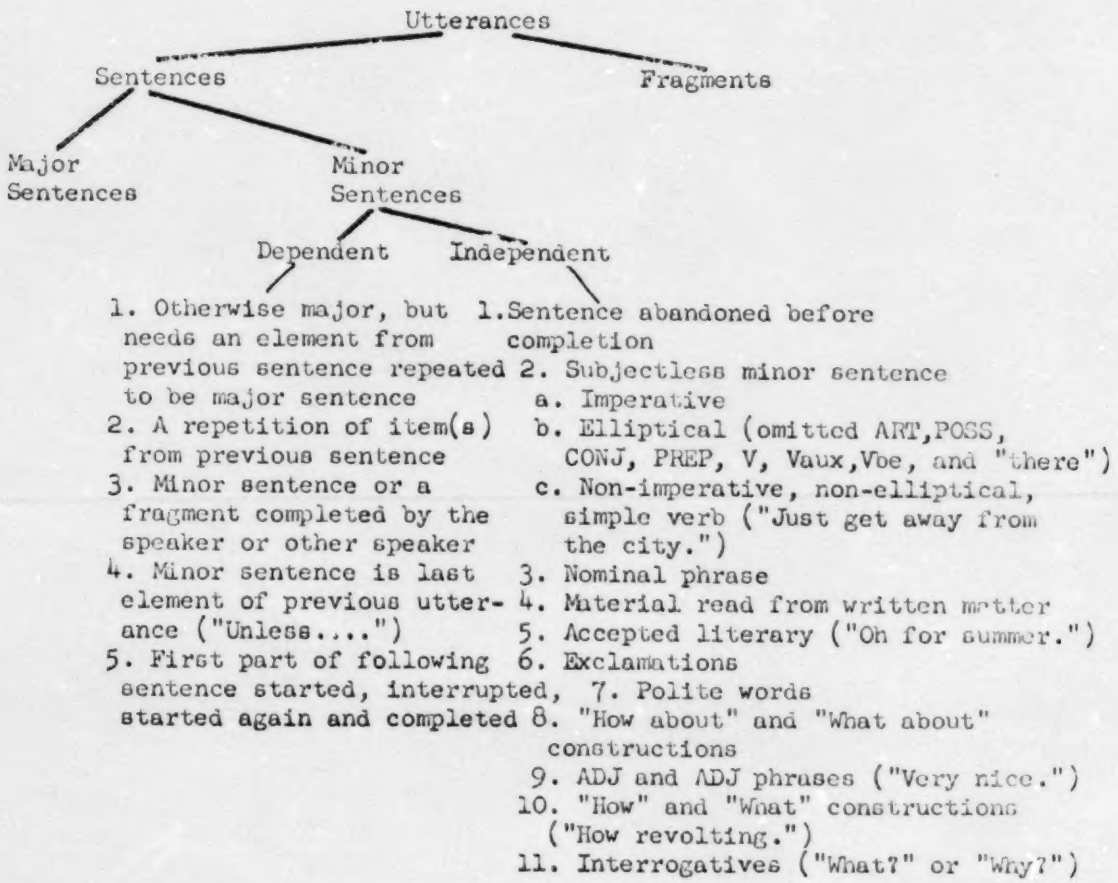
Nida lists minor sentence types according to a threefold division: completive types, exclamatory types, and aphoristic expression types. He also presents a complete discourse set (a "universe of discourse" in the current jargon) made of nothing but minor sentences.

p. 216: "How much for these?"
"Fifty cents a dozen."
"Too much. How about these over here?"
"Well, how much for them?"
"Forty cents per."
"All right."
"A few sprigs of parsley too, then?"
"Okay."
"Thanks!"
"Good-bye."

10. Elizabeth Bowman used the following schema, and in the Kline and Memering study, soon to be published in Research in the Teaching of English, this schema was used rather than Nida's. One reason for choosing it over Nida's is the degree of completeness; another is its clarity and applicability to our purpose--which was to study the significance of the "fragment" (and the controversy surrounding it) in the teaching of writing.

Figure One

Bowman's Classificatory Schema

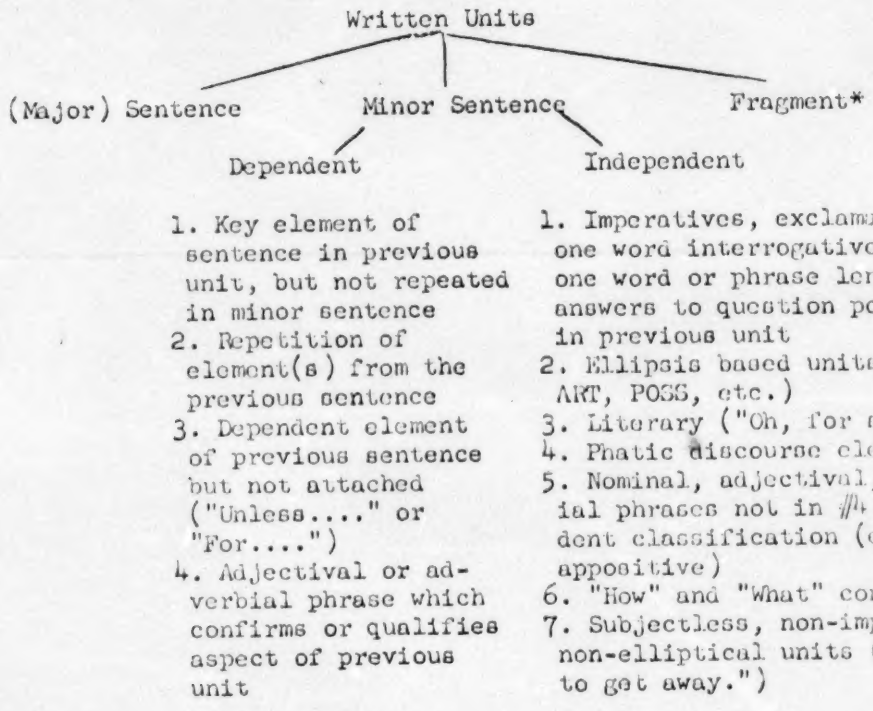

Utterances
Sentences
Fragments
Major Sentences
Minor Sentences
Dependent
Independent
1. Otherwise major, but needs an element from previous sentence repeated to be major sentence
2. A repetition of item(s) from previous sentence
3. Minor sentence or a fragment completed by the speaker or other speaker
4. Minor sentence is last element of previous utterance ("Unless....")
5. First part of following sentence started, interrupted, started again and completed
1. Sentence abandoned before completion
2. Subjectless minor sentence
a. Imperative
b. Elliptical (omitted ART,POSS, CONJ, PREP, V, Vaux,Vbe, and "there")
c. Non-imperative, non-elliptical, simple verb ("Just get away from the city.")
3. Nominal phrase
4. Material read from written matter
5. Accepted literary ("Oh for summer.")
6. Exclamations
7. Polite words
8. "How about" and "What about" constructions
9. ADJ and ADJ phrases ("Very nice.")
10. "How" and "What" constructions ("How revolting.")
11. Interrogatives ("What?" or "Why?")

Bowman, E. The minor and fragmentary sentences of a corpus of spoken English. International Journal of American Linguistics, Part II, 1966, 33, 3.

11. Since Bowman's schema was based upon spoken English, we could not apply it without alteration to units of written English. We kept, however, the useful distinctions among major sentence, minor sentence, and fragment. The resulting schema looks like this.

Figure Two

Minor Sentence Schema for Written English


Written Units
(Major) Sentence
Minor Sentence
Fragment*
Dependent
Independent
1. Key element of sentence in previous unit, but not repeated in minor sentence
2. Repetition of element(s) from the previous sentence
3. Dependent element of previous sentence but not attached ("Unless...." or "For....")
4. Adjectival or adverbial phrase which confirms or qualifies aspect of previous unit
1. Imperatives, exclamations, one word interrogatives, and one word or phrase length answers to question posed in previous unit
2. Ellipsis based units (missing ART, POSS, etc.)
3. Literary ("Oh, for summer.")
4. Phatic discourse elements
5. Nominal, adjectival, or adverbial phrases not in #4 of Dependent classification (esp., appositive)
6. "How" and "What" constructions
7. Subjectless, non-imperative, non-elliptical units ("Just to get away.")

*The fragment would be defined in this schema as a unit which would not fit into any of the above categories or which is a dependent minor sentence with no context.

Kline, C. R., Jr., and W. D. Memering. Formal fragments: The English minor sentence. Research in the Teaching of English, forthcoming [accepted 4-19-75].

12. Dependent minor sentences are useful tools for writers; they are useful, because they allow the writer to punctuate off as a major point whatever idea or part of a sentence is needed. Since they are dependent minor sentences, there is one general rule for using them:

> Dependent Minor Sentences should be contiguously placed and related to either an Independent Minor Sentence or a (Major) Sentence.

In conclusion I would like to reemphasize certain key points: sentences are both grammatical and rhetorical devices in that elements of and considerations involving both structures and intents/effects combine to decide correctness/usefulness. Rather than restrain our beginning writers from using minor sentences, we should concentrate upon the broader rhetorical issues of invention, arrangement, and style. Writers using minor sentences of the dependent classification (like grammar, using forms and being able to discuss the differen t forms are not the same things) should always maintain contiguous relationships with other minor sentences and/or (major) sentences. Usage is fluid. Sentences are complete units of expression. Combining sentences (minor and major sentences) into paragraphs and combining paragraphs into complete discourse units involves placing units of expression together to achieve certain desired results; therefore, considerations of intent and effect, logic, fluency, and audience become more important (in inventing, composing, and editing) than grammaticality.

Thank you.